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### **Talking Activism and Writing**

October 16th, 2009

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Activist and historian Benjamin Heim Shepard discusses the role of play in advancing queer politics in New York City. Shepard's contribution point towards the relationship between pleasure and play—a valorization of sensuality, humor, and agency in the present tense—as a prospect for political change. WWAN catches up with New York writer and activist Benjamin Shepard about his newly released book *Queer Politics and Political Performance: Play, Pleasure, and Social Movement: Play, Pleasure, and Social Movement* (Routledge, 2009).

Marisa Jahn: Why did you write this book? And why should activists write books?

Benjamin Shepard: That's a big question. In terms of the first part of the question, there is an old expression that the last chapter of one book often finds its way into the opening salvo for the next. As I was finishing my first book, *White Nights and Ascending Shadows: An Oral History of the San Francisco AIDS Epidemic in 1996*, I started seeing a bunch of writing about the AIDS years with a very moralizing lens. Writers and commentators such as Andrew Sullivan had been writing that AIDS was over, the AIDS activism of ACT UP was counterproductive and irresponsible, and gay people needed to put the lessons of gay liberation behind them so they could grow up, fit into the system, join the army, get married, and become normal. As a person who drew a huge amount of inspiration from both the lessons of gay liberation as well as queer/AIDS direct action, this understanding felt abhorrent. And I starting writing about the dangerous uses of this moralizing in the end of the book.

By the time I moved to the New York City in 1997, this debate had become a full scale culture war. While some asked queers to just grow up and act more like straight people, another cohort of activists argued that being queer meant embracing difference, sexual self determination, and the uses of pleasure in movements for social change. Dubbing themselves SexPanic!, these activists did it within a post-modernist, ironic, campy activist flair. They put flyers calling their opponents "Turdz" inside the book jackets of their political enemies, the Gang of Four, did fundraisers at sex clubs, held street actions at Show World, a strip club, and the like. I started going to meetings within a week of moving to town. And I was immediately taken by the culture of pleasure and politics and

sex and a public commons in NYC. It was something I had never quite seen before. And I wanted to figure out what that was all about. This is largely the story I write about in the book. In between the fights, the demo diva's, the cruising at meetings, the drinks afterwards, the prop making parties, work on press releases and so on, I was completely taken aback. Yet, throughout the process, we were wracking our brains to defend public sexual culture, and by extension public space for debate and difference in New York City. In the end, the SexPanic! culture wars, the sex wars opened up a huge new space for me to think about culture, cities, pleasure, sex, urban public space, and social movements, even if we lost lots of those battles.

Strange thing is the group fell apart almost as immediately as it began. This probably brings the story to the second part of the question, why should activists write books? I'll extend that to ask, why should activists reflect on their work? Saul Alinski used to accuse young activists of being nothing but a bunch of undigested actions. He said we have to take the time to honestly reflect on what works and does not work. Without this, we doom ourselves to just doing the same thing over and over again while expecting different results, while adding a few more failed movements to the garbage heap of history.

MJ: How do you see play as a germane lens for examining the gay liberation and queer activist movement? Said in other terms, why is it that play has so prominently figured the gay liberation and queer activist movement?

BS: This is one of the few movements in history that actually conceptualized the idea of pleasure as an end unto itself for movement players. Certainly, Surrealists, Dada, and the Situationists recognized the liberatory potential of play as means to free thought and possibility outside of the social relations organized around work and production, which seemed to reinforce alienated social experiences. They valued the liberatory possibilities of play. Yet, it was the Gay Liberation and later the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power who declared that sexual self-determination, pleasure, and expression could serve as both means and ends of movements for social change. This is not to suggest that play was everything for these movements. And the play that was there, it was not without controversy. From the earliest days of Gay Liberation, queers have fought over the meanings of sexual self-determination. Yet, many were aware that embracing pleasure and play offered a stark contrast to the old left view that pleasure should take place after the revolution and the hard work of class politics is resolved. What both queers and the Situationists suggested was that in its rejection of a life based on the drudgery of just punching the clock, paying rent, and going to and from a boring job. There had to be more than a means of necessity, argued Herbert Marcuse, who is perhaps the most important theorist of play and social movements.

Yet, to be clear, play is only one part of a larger organizing campaign which includes a

clear ask or proposal, research on an issue, a communications strategy to move this issue, a mobilization strategy, direct action, a legal strategy and a bit of play to sustain a movement. By the AIDS years, I was profoundly intrigued with the ways that queer sustained their movements in the face of the mass AIDS carnage, using combinations of queer aesthetics, camp, sex, research, direct action, and saavy representation of the issues. Right in the middle of this, play and social eros were large components of these movement practices.

**MJ:** What are inspiring historical antecedents to the way that play characterizes the gay liberation and queer activist movement?

**BS:** It's hard to know how far back to trace the social and aesthetic movements associated with play, pleasure, and sexual freedom. Some of the first that I know were the Dionysus Cults, which so agitated the Romans with irreverent and steadfast dedication to drink and sex that the Roman leaders, the *Carrie Nations* of their day who were not part of the party, sought to prohibit their gatherings. That policy worked about as well as our 18th Amendment banning alcohol and starting prohibition. How queer was their subversive commitment to debauchery? Gay Activist Alliance icon Arthur Evans wrote his own version of the *Bacchae* by Euripides. Dionysus has been described in terms reflective of current understanding of trans expression. Carivaggio's portrait of Bacchus [Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610) - Bacchus (c.1595)] only highlights the gay and fierce quality of the Dionysus cult which has inspired writers and poets through the centuries.

While it is usually expressed with bodies, play is also expressed with words such as in the topsy-turvy of Dada or in Whitman's poetry, among other things. "I sing the body electric..." links an ageless impulse toward freedom of body and thoughts.

In terms of social movements, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Free Love advocates, anarchists including Emma Goldman and company were huge supporters of both play and sexual freedoms, which they saw as a refreshing contrast to the bondage of marriage and state-sanctioned social relationships. "No other Americans ... devoted so much time and effort to exploring the social, moral, and ethical place of same sex love," writes Terence Kissack in his fascinating new history 'Free Comrades: Anarchism and Homosexuality in the United States. 1895 – 1917': "And neither did anyone else of the period develop a political understanding of the right of men and women to love whomsoever they wished, whenever and wherever they wished, in a manner of their choosing." Over the years, anarchist queer activism has increasingly built on a recognition of the insurrectionary possibilities of free play.

In terms of art, you had Dada-ists and Surrealists, who explored a world gone reeling from the generational mass suicide practiced on the West front from 1914-18. They did it through with new approaches to living, explorations in personal sexual freedom, word

play, mind freedom, theatre, and gender bending. Duchamp's ready-made submission of a toilet to the 1917 New York Society for Independent Artists show and his postcard of the Mona Lisa with a moustache with the graffiti – “she's got a hot ass” —these works were thought to be early and potent examples of the power of a pranks to get people to think. The Surrealists took an interest in the unconscious, psychoanalysis and approaches to play, freedom of the sexuality, the imagination and the unconscious and applied it to a new movement in art. Yet, these experiments did not come without a cost. Magnus Hirschfield's 'Weimar Era Institute of Sex' was burnt down during the first week the Nazis were in power in May of 1933. The Weimar Cabaret was theatre of transgression. The fate of Dada and Surrealism and the Sexologists helped inspire the formation of the Mattachine Society in 1948 in Los Angeles. From here, queer thinking overlapped and co-mingled with movements ranging from the Beats to Punk to current global justice movement of movements.

In later years, the same psychoanalytic movement which influenced the Surrealists inspired Marcuse to write 'Eros and Civilization', perhaps the most important study of play. Many of the early proponents of this movement theorized about play and freedom of the mind. British gay activist Peter Tatchell argues that Sigmund Freud helped challenge sexual ignorance, while establishing a liberatory understanding of sex. So the roots of movement are many.

**MJ:** How can some of the tactics explored in this book inform the art and activist community in New York?

**BS:** Groups such as GRAN FURY, Group Material, Diva TV have inspired and influenced current movements in any number of ways. For example, Diva TV and its approach to activists creating their own media directly anticipates the current approaches DIY media production, the independent media movement, and the innovations of You Tube which has so profoundly changed the way we tell the stories about movements. There are so many examples. For queer activism, art has long been a part of telling a movement story. Here, art brought the movement's aims into wide audiences, with publics who intuitively connected with the messages of the art and felt compelled to do some thing about it – a pretty tall order. This is common understating. But it is easier said than done. That's the hard part.

**MJ:** What in this book did you not get to write about that you would have liked to cover?

**BS:** Well, it is the first play of a much larger study of play and movement activity. One can only cover so much in one volume. Upcoming works include three more books on play as it overlaps with local and social movements: 'Play, Creativity and Social : If I Can't Dance, Its Not My Revolution!,' 'the Beach Beneath the Streets: Exclusion, Control, and Play in Public Space', and 'The Community Projects as Social Action.' Each

considers play from a different vantage point. The first, 'Play, Creativity, and Social Movements' considers the phenomena historically, from the Surrealism to DaDa, Situationism to punk, queer activism to squatting, links between neighborhood groups, such as Lower East Side Collective and global justice movements, in which I played a small part. 'The Beach Beneath the Streets' considers tension between public and private spaces, play and social control. The final work, 'Community Projects as Social Action' considers play as a component of a holistic organizing strategy. It looks at the increasing need for mutual aid network to help support communities of care, especially as the social safety net bears more wear as the financial crisis churns forward. But there are so many topics I wish I had time to write about. Topics such as punk and queer activism, friendship in movements, immigration and global movements, there are so many amazing stories of heroes out there. I write every day in an effort to make sense of and honor all the work of the amazing activism taking place every day, little of which garners mainstream media coverage. All this work involves a reflection of an action research approach, beginning with the interplay of actions we plan, participant observation of how the action goes, reflection on the action, generating more questions, research, actions, stories and so on. As the song line says, the road goes on forever and the party never ends.

<http://www.routledge-ny.com/books/Queer-Political-Performance-and-Protest-ISBN9780415960960>

**Benjamin Shepard**

Benjamin Shepard, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Human Service at New York School of Technology/City University of New York. He is the author/editor of six books including *White Nights and Ascending Shadows: An Oral History of the San Francisco AIDS Epidemic* (Cassell, 1997) and *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization* (co-edited with Ron Hayduck) (Verso, 2002). The latter work was a non-fiction finalist for the Lambda Literary Awards in 2002. His forthcoming works include part two of this study on play: *Play, Creativity, and the New Community Organizing* (Routledge), *The Beach Beneath the Streets: Exclusion, Control, and Play in Public Space* (co-written with Greg Smithsimon) (SUNY Press) and *Community Projects as Social Activism* (Sage). Further his writing has appeared in anthologies including, *Democracy, States and the Struggle for Global Justice* (Routledge, 2009), *Nobody Passes* (Seal Press, 2006), *The Encyclopedia of Social Movements* (Sharpe, 2004), *That's Revolting: Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation* (Soft Skull Press, 2004) *Democracy's Moment: Renewing Democracy for the 21st Century* and *Teamsters and Turtles: Leftist Movements Today and Tomorrow* (both 2002, Roman and Littlefield), and journals including: *Working USA*, *Radical Society*, *Lambda Book Review*, *Monthly Review*, *Sexualities*, the *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, *Antioch Review*, *Monthly Review*, and *Drain* among others. He got his start writing music reviews for *Detour* and profiles for the *Bay Area Reporter* in the early 1990s'. He has done organizing work with the *AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP)*, *SexPanic!*, *Reclaim the Streets New York*, *Times UP*, the *Clandestine Rebel Clown Army*, the *Absurd Response Team*, *CitiWide Harm Reduction*, *Housing Works*, the *More Gardens Coalition*, and the *Times UP Bike Lane Liberation Front* and *Garden Working Groups*. Most all of his work involves the

interplay between activist practices, theory, and praxis.

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**Speculating on Change**

HYPERLINK "<http://wherewearenow.org/listings/great-evenings-in-the-great-hall-radical-politics/>" Great Evenings in The Great Hall: Radical Politics, January 21st at 10:00 pm